



# The Blue Sheet

Practical Application of Iowa's Blueprint for Permanency

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## SOCIAL WORKER VISITS WITH PARENTS:

### Quality Social Worker Visits with Parents and Assessing Progress to Safe Case Closure

Quality visits assess the safety, well-being, and permanency of children and families while engaging them and ensuring their needs are met to achieve safe case closure.

Social worker visits are a critical component of our work for ensuring the safety of children and the well-being of families.

"Caseworkers meet with children and families to monitor children's safety and well-being; assess the ongoing service needs of children and families; engage parents in developing case plans; assess permanency options for the child; monitor family progress toward established goals; and ensure that children and parents are receiving necessary services. At each stage of the intervention, caseworkers, with the support of their supervisors, determine the type of supports that children and their families need to ensure that the children are safe and have stable living arrangements that promote their well-being."<sup>1</sup>

Safe case closure criteria are conditions which must be achieved in order for the family, the court, and service system practitioners to know and reasonably believe that the safety and well-being of the children is both adequate and can be reasonably expected to continue without disruption following the completion of services. Assessing progress toward safe case closure is an important component of each visit with parents.<sup>2</sup>

### Link to Positive Outcomes

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Although child welfare experts have always known that caseworker visits are important, evidence now shows the extent to which such visits may be linked to positive outcomes for children and families who are engaged in child welfare systems. Findings from the federal Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs), which examine state child welfare agency performance, have shown an association between a positive rating on caseworker visits and positive ratings on other areas under review. One of the most important ways to promote positive outcomes for children and their families is to ensure the quality and frequency of caseworker visits with the children and families in the agency's care.

Child Welfare Caseworker Visits with Children and Parents, September, 2006, National Conference of State Legislatures

<sup>1</sup> Child Welfare Caseworker Visits with Children and Parents, NCSL, September 2006

<sup>2</sup> Human Systems and Outcomes, Planning for Safe Case Closure and Family Independence, 2007,

## Purpose of Quality Social Worker Visits with Parents

- ENGAGE AND BUILD TRUST ● SHARE INFORMATION ●
- GATHER INFORMATION NECESSARY TO UNDERSTAND THE FAMILY AND THEIR SITUATION ●
- MEANINGFUL INQUIRY AND CONSULTATION ●
- SHARED DECISION-MAKING AND PLANNING ● FOCUS ON THE FAMILY'S CASE PLAN ●
- FOCUS ON PROGRESS ● ASSESS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENERS ●
- DETERMINE WHEN SAFE CASE CLOSURE CRITERIA ARE MET ●

### Purpose of Visits

Visits with parents offer opportunities to: engage and build trust-based relationships with both parents. We build trust by spending time with the family, communicating clearly, demonstrating genuineness and honesty, listening carefully with empathy, and coming to agreement about a course of action together. As we engage the parents, we need to recognize the significance of a father's involvement to the well-being of his children. We must work to counteract the tendencies of social workers to overlook fathers in child protection practices.

Visits with parents offer opportunities to gather information necessary to understand the family and their situation, including:

- *strengths* they can bring to bear on the current situation
- *presenting problems and underlying issues*,
- family and child *safety and risk*,
- family member *functioning* in daily settings,
- *parental capacity and family interaction*,
- upcoming family/child *transitions*,
- self-sufficiency needs, and
- supports and resources of the family.

Visits with parents offer opportunities to: *share information* about child welfare processes, court hearings, interventions and services.

Quality visits provide opportunities for supportive and skill building exchanges. It is important to take opportunities for teachable moments to address the problems and underlying issues which have necessitated system involvement.

Visits with parents offer opportunities to: Make decisions together with the family or family team and plan for safety, permanency, and well-being. Each visit should include problem- solving together to resolve issues and barriers to progress and safe case closure.

Visits with parents offer opportunities to focus on progress and assess the effectiveness of interveners to initiate and sustain movement toward identified goals and conditions for safe case closure.

### Skills for Quality Visits

*Engaging:* Social workers must demonstrate the skill of effectively establishing a relationship with children, parents, and essential individuals for the purpose of sustaining the work that is to be accomplished together.

*Teaming:* Social workers must demonstrate the skill of assembling a group to work with children and families, becoming a member of an established group, or leading a group for shared

decision-making and success in bringing needed resources to the critical issues of children and families.

*Assessing:* Social workers must demonstrate the skill of obtaining information what brought the children and families into our services and the underlying causes bringing about their situations. This discovery process looks for strengths and needs to determine the capability, willingness, and availability of resources for achieving safety, permanence, and well-being. Gathered information is evaluated with the family.

*Planning:* Social workers are required to demonstrate the skill necessary to tailor the planning process uniquely to each child and family. This includes the design of incremental steps that move children and families from where they are to a better level of functioning. Service planning requires the planning cycle of assessing circumstances and resources, facilitating shared decisions on directions to take, evaluating the effectiveness of the plan, reworking the plan as needed, celebrating successes, and confronting consequences in response to lack of improvement.

*Intervening:* Social workers are required to demonstrate the skill to intercede with actions that will decrease risk, provide for safety, promote permanence, and establish well-being. These skills may range from finding housing to helping a parent change their pattern of thinking about their child.

*Tracking/Adapting* Social workers are required to demonstrate the skill to carefully

monitor implementation of the individualized service plan and the progress being made toward

the goal and objectives of the plan to adapt strategies and interventions to be effective.

## *Evidence Based Practice: Quality Social Worker Visits with Parents*

- Location and Timing ● ●Preparation and Planning ● ●Meaningful Inquiry and Consultation● ●Assessing Performance of Interveners●  
●Focus on the Family's Case Plan● ●Support and Skill-Building Exchanges

Factors for quality visits include:

- Where and when visits are held - visits that are held primarily in the family home and at times convenient for children and both biological and foster parents are more successful.
- Preparation and planning improves visitation outcomes - visits that are planned in advance with established goals and issues for discussion are of higher quality.
- Visits that provide opportunities for children and parents to ask questions and communicate concerns result in better outcomes - visits should be open enough for meaningful consultation.
- Opportunities for individual discussions contribute to improved case planning - discussions with children and parents individually provides the opportunity to privately share experiences and concerns that might not be disclosed to other family members (e.g., domestic violence).
- Opportunities to assess the performance of families, the agency, and the social worker should be included in visits - effective visits communicate an exchange of information and a commitment on the part of the agency and social worker to help the family.
- Quality visitation focuses on the family's case plan - discussions center on the completion of actions necessary to support family goal achievement and case closure.
- Situational awareness is a critical component of quality visitation – social workers examine changes in the child and family's circumstances on an ongoing basis.
- Quality visitation provides supportive and skill-building exchanges – social workers carefully plan visits to address particular family needs and use communication techniques to build rapport and relationships.
- Provide supportive supervision to facilitate quality visitation – social workers are able to differentiate supportive supervision from an otherwise unsupportive work environment, and they view supervision as more important.

### Questions to Assess Quality Visits

- What were the goals of the visit? Were the goals of the visit met? Was sufficient time spent planning the visit?
- What worked well during the visit? What did not work well and why?
- What new and useful information came from observations and interviews made during the visit?
- Were the child and family members or out-of-home caregivers free from harm in the home?
- Was child well-being adequate? If not, what actions are indicated?
- Was progress toward permanency evident? If not, what barriers were found? Are changes in the permanency goal needed? Should the prognosis for permanency be changed based on observations made?
- What important new information was learned about the effectiveness of providers serving this child or family? How can we use this now?
- Should any goals or strategies in the family plan be changed as a result of new things learned during the visit? What changes are indicated?
- What challenges emerged? Are there better ways to address them?
- What feedback was requested and received regarding the agency and caseworker performance and how might it be addressed?
- What was learned during the visit that requires follow-up?
- What goals should the next visit include?

## Safety, Risk, and the Safety Threshold

Safety and risk assessment is an important part of each visit with parents. Safety and risk assessments lead to actions we take, what interventions are necessary, and how interventions are provided. So understanding the difference between safety and risk is important. It is also important to be able to understand and judge when family characteristics or circumstances have reached the safety threshold. "The safety threshold refers to the point when family conditions in the form of behaviors, attitudes, emotions, intent, situations, etc. are manifested in such a way that they are beyond being risk influences and have become threatening to child safety. These facts should exist concerning a family condition in order for it to qualify as having reached the safety threshold:

- A specific, observable family condition in the form of behavior, emotion, attitude, perception, intent or situation.
- A family condition is out of control – there appears to be no natural, existing means within the family (network) that can assure the control.
- A family condition reasonably could have a severe effect on a vulnerable child. The severe effect could include serious physical injury, significant pain and suffering, abduction, disability, terror or extreme fear, impairment or death.
- The severe effect is imminent which means it could happen

just about any time within the near future – today, tomorrow or during the upcoming days."<sup>3</sup>

Visitation provides important opportunities for social workers to assess *safety* and *risk*.

**Risk of maltreatment** refers to the likelihood for parenting behavior that is harmful and destructive to children's growth and development

Risk is concerned with...

- Likelihood of future maltreatment
- Maltreatment on a continuum from mild to severe
- General well-being
- Decision making based on an unlimited timeframe
- Judgment about any negative effects from future maltreatment
- Evaluation of the family situation and behavior that may need to be treated or controlled
- All aspects of family life relevant to understanding the likelihood of maltreatment

**Child safety** refers to conditions when there is no threat of danger to the child within the family home and when protective capacities within the home can manage threat of safety.

Safety is concerned with...

- Current family conditions
- Severe forms of dangerous family conditions
- Specific threats to a child's safety
- Decision making based on the present to immediate future
- Judgment about the certainty of severe effects
- Evaluation of the family situation and behavior that

must be managed and controlled

- A limited number of safety factors for consideration

## Safe Case Closure

*Safe Case Closure* planning is the process of setting measurable conditions or outcomes that must be achieved in order for the family to exit the child welfare system. A successful family change process requires that a family select, own, and support the desired outcomes of adequate family functioning and wellbeing leading to independence. Planning for safe case closure starts when DHS initially becomes involved with a child and family. At the onset, DHS and the family's team needs to identify the specific changes that must occur in order for the case to be closed.

*Measurable conditions for case closure* are specific outcomes related to child safety, permanency, and well-being. These conditions must be achieved in order for the family, the court, and service system practitioners to know and reasonably believe that the safety and well-being of the children is both adequate and can be reasonably expected to continue without disruption following the completion of services. In applying conditions for case closure, it is understood that perfection is an unlikely standard for achieving family change. As a basic condition for case closure the family, the

<sup>3</sup> ACTION for Child Protection, Inc. Considering the Safety Threshold, Page 3, September, 2004

family team, the court and service system practitioners, should be assured of adequate child safety and well-being and possess a reasonable expectation that these conditions will be sustained by the family following independence from the service system.

Making a Decision about Case Closure should be part of the Family Team Decision-Making Team process. Prior to closing a case, the worker and supervisor should review the following questions:

- Is the home environment safe and stable? Are the basic needs of the children met?

- Are the parents/caretakers able to manage risks or threats to safety to the children and others in the home?
- Are the parents/caretakers able to sustain the behavior changes that keep the children safe and stable? For example, will they follow safety plans and relapse plans even if DHS is not involved?
- Does the family have a reliable support system that will remain, even after DHS and formal services exit?
- Are court issues related to permanency resolved? Specifically, if Juvenile Court has ordered a change in guardianship or custody, is

there now a Juvenile District Court order in place that will make these changes permanent?

- If the case involves a youth “aging out of the system” does the youth have adequate supports to successfully transition to independent living? Is the youth connected with a supportive adult that has a commitment to the youth life-long?
- If the court end’s involvement, does DHS continue to provide services needed to assure safety, permanency, and well-being as well as plan for or implement transition plans?

## What Needs To Change for Kids To Be Safe and for This Case To Close?

From the onset, define conditions for safe case closure. Incorporate into the family’s plan strategies and steps to achieve safe case closure. These include:

- *Protective provisions* that must be put into place to keep people in the home safe.
- *Behavioral patterns* that must be acquired and then adequately, consistently demonstrated by the caregiver to preserve or reunify a family and to maintain family stability and daily functioning.
- *Recovery/relapse prevention, advance care directives, safety plans with response capacities* that must be put in place and work reliably.
- *Sustainable family supports* (e.g., housing, health care, adequate supervision, connections to extended family and community supports etc.) that will preserve and sustain the family following case closure.
- *Resolution of legal issues and court requirements* (e.g., court orders, guardianship, and adoption) that must be achieved before family independence, case closure, and permanency can occur.
- *Measures and schedules* for determining progress, outcomes, and satisfaction of *case closure* requirements - these elements define for the family and practitioners/providers: *how we will know what’s working and when we’re done.*

